

Whaler's Well

The remains of a brick-lined well were discovered here during archaeological investigations in 2017. The well is thought to be associated with the Rosetta Harbor Whaling Station, established in early 1837.



The Scent of Profit

On 8 April 1802 near here, English explorer Captain Matthew Flinders met French explorer Captain Baudin by chance. As a consequence of their meeting Flinders named the place Encounter Bay. Flinders' reports on the potential resources available for exploitation, with seal skins and whale oil being the primary consideration, drew people to the Southern waters with the scent of profit under their noses.

Whaling was undoubtedly the first form of trade for South Australia, even before it was officially settled and proclaimed in 1836.

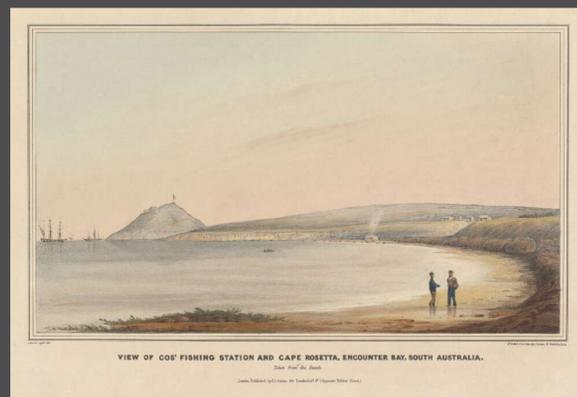


Whalers shed c1890
Sourced from Pat Uppill.

Whaling at Encounter Bay

In early 1837 the South Australian Company officially established a whaling station in this vicinity on Rosetta Harbor. A rival station was set up by Captain Blenkinsopp which, until their amalgamation in 1839, contributed to a tumultuous relationship between the whalers with a large degree of conflict between the two stations.

A drawing made by Colonel Light in 1838 shows buildings which were used as whaler's quarters and it is likely that the well was dug and used by the whalers during this time.



Colonel Light ,1838 Sketch of Rosetta Head showing whalers' production area on the shore and domestic area on the hill.
Source: Trove <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-135294347/>

Life of a Whaler

Whaling was a grim business with the slaughter of one whale taking many hours and boats full of men. Whales were sighted from high lookouts; a flagstaff was located on top of Rosetta Head (the Bluff) to signal a whale had been sighted. Whale boats were dispatched and if the whale was caught it was towed back for 'cutting in' and boiling down or 'trying out', where the blubber was removed and placed in large iron try-pots to extract the oil by heating.

The physical nature of the chase, weather conditions, reefs, rocks and surf made whaling a dangerous business, appealing to the hardier characters.



A section of Whaling Station at Encounter Bay
Edward Snell, Christmas Day, 1850
(Original sketches from Snell's diary held in State Library of Victoria's Australian Manuscripts Collection and published by that Library in 1988.).
<https://collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/resource/B+17264>

Newspaper account:

There is an extensive Whale Fishery establishment at Encounter Bay, which during the season, gives employment to a number of hands. It comprises try-works, Coopers and Smiths shops etc. There is also an Inn and Hotel in connection with which is a boat-building yard

(South Australian Register, 24 July 1841).

Decline

Although initially successful, whaling at Rosetta Head was short-lived. The South Australian Company's participation in whaling ceased in 1840.

Whaling continued in the area at a significantly lower scale until the last whale was caught in 1872. More than 100 years later the whales have finally returned to these waters. All of the whalers' huts and associated buildings have long since been removed from the surface. This well provides an important historical record and reminds us of the harsh realities of the lives of these early South Australians.